

Transfer United: Partnerships to Foster Transfer Student Success

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Abstract: The success of community college transfer students is critical to meeting national goals and future workforce demands. This presents an important challenge to four-year colleges and universities. Students who start their degree at a two-year institution and transfer to four-year institution are less likely to reach their educational goals when compared to similar students directly entering a four-year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Innovative, educational programming is needed to support transfer student persistence. In particular, students need programming to adjust academically and socially to their new institution. Such programming requires strategic partnerships across campus units to foster student success. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) has developed one such program, Transfer United, to encourage junior transfer student persistence and baccalaureate degree attainment. Preliminary assessment of this program demonstrates a positive influence on student retention. The article offers Transfer United as a promising practice recommended for replication at other four-year institutions.

Introduction

As the United States struggles to rebound from years of economic recession, the interconnectedness of higher education and economic growth is a continuous topic in national dialogues. President Barack Obama has maintained that the future of American prosperity relies on a better-educated workforce. Through the American Graduation Initiative, the President has unveiled an agenda and a vision for the United States to retake the world lead in college graduation rates by 2020. The United States currently ranks behind 11 countries in the share of young workers with college degrees (The White House, 2009). Meeting the goals of the American Graduation Initiative will necessitate that higher education institutions implement proactive retention and degree completion strategies (Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011). Considering projected demographic shifts in areas of population growth, ethnicity, immigration, and distribution of wealth as well as projections of K-12 enrollment and projections of higher education enrollment, the success of community college transfer students will be critical to meeting future workforce demands. To meet college graduation goals, it is essential for higher education policy makers, researchers, and practitioners to appreciate the needs and experiences of transfer students.

Innovative undergraduate education for transfer students is critical to the development of human resources. Specialized transfer student programming is necessary to enable more students to attain a four-year undergraduate degree and meet future workplace expectations. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) has worked diligently to respond to the calls of The American Graduation Initiative as well as the needs of community college students from across the state of North Carolina. The University has developed proactive programming to encourage junior transfer student transition and persistence. In particular, the Transfer United program is working to support junior transfer students and set a solid foundation for student success during college and beyond. This program serves as a platform to create a stronger and more well-informed workforce, not just for North Carolina, but for the nation.

The program is offered in this article as a model of best practice for undergraduate education and for transfer student success to be replicated at institutions of higher education across the country.

Transfer Student Trends

As global competition increases and as the demographics of the United States change, the importance of increasing the graduation rate of students from diverse backgrounds cannot be overstated (Lopez, 2006). In particular the success of community college transfer students, many of whom are first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and students from historically underrepresented populations, is critical to increasing graduation rates. The number of students transferring from two-year colleges to four-year Universities is rising (Ishitani, 2008). Many low-income, first-generation college students begin their studies at a two-year community college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). An institutional self-study of undergraduate student success at UNC-CH (Retention Task Force, 2010) revealed that community college transfer students at UNC-CH are among the least likely to graduate and are more likely than other students to be first generation and from a low-income family. The results of this self-study reflect a national trend of low four-year degree completion rates among transfer students.

Transfers are more likely to be non-traditional age college students and underprepared for the academic rigors of the research university. Transfer students commonly experience dissonance between the academic rigor and culture of their previous institution and their new university. Transitioning to a university where the course work is often at a much higher level than their previous institution and where other students have already formed networks of support contribute to transfers feeling discouraged and academically inadequate (Cejda, 1997; Hills, 1965; Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Many transfer students experience a decline in academic performance, face challenges connecting with students and staff, and perceive high impact educational opportunities such as internships and lab opportunities, to be inaccessible (Ishitani, 2008). Due to these factors, many transfer students feel the university environment is designed to discourage students from persisting rather than to encourage interest, skills-development, and efficacy (Chang, 2006). Transfer students graduate at a significantly lower rate and are likely to change their major during or shortly after their first semester at the University. To increase the overall number of college graduates, it is necessary to increase the persistence of transfer students and offer supportive pathways to degree attainment.

Transfer Student Success

A growing body of research suggests that undergraduate students who transfer to a four-year university experience more academic turbulence and challenges with social integration than students who persist at the same institution for their academic tenure (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Britt & Hirt, 1999; McCormick & Horn, 1996; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008). The term *transfer shock*, coined by Hills (1965), refers to the initial transitional period for transfers. This period frequently includes a significant drop in grades. The transfer shock period includes the processes of adjustment. Adjustment is involves developing a sense of commitment to the institution and to degree completion as well as the absence of psychological distress (Chartrand, 1992). Transfer students must adjust both academically and socially (Laanan, 2001).

Academic Adjustment

It is important for transfer students to adjust academically to succeed at their new institution (Laanan, 2001). The initial challenges transfer students are likely to face as they adjust academically concern academic planning. These challenges include receiving academic advising prior to their first

semester, negotiating the transfer credit evaluation process, enrolling in the appropriate level of coursework, selecting a major that best meets their academic ability, and navigating changes in academic rigor (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Institutions can support students as they make academic adjustments by providing services including orientation and academic advising (Kerr, King, & Grites, 2004). Community college transfer students also struggle to adjust academically to the size and pace of courses at a large university (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Furthermore, students have reported that the expectation of community college instructors varies greatly from the expectations of instructors at four-year institutions. For example, community college instructors are likely to require students to turn in weekly homework assignments whereas instructors at a larger, research institution are not likely to require such activity. According to Townsend and Wilson's (2006) study of community college transfers, not having this weekly accountability negatively influences transfer student test performance. Transfer students are also likely to struggle with academic-related administrative tasks including registration processes, dropping classes, and filing graduation paperwork (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Social Adjustment

Social adjustment is a critical part of the successful transition to a four-year institution (Laanan, 2001). Transfer students to four-year institutions are likely to experience several challenges in social adjustment. To increase their likelihood of successful social adjustment, it is important for transfer students to develop a strong social network and community on their new campus as well as a sense of belonging. This can be especially challenging for transfers as they are more likely than other students to have work requirements, family obligations, and lack knowledge on how to become involved in campus activities (Wang, 2009). Many transfer students exhibit signs of *impostor syndrome* which thwarts their ability to cultivate a strong sense of belonging. Impostor syndrome involves students functioning in a new environment with a potent feeling that they do not belong there and that, in fact, they may only be there due to a clerical error or institutional mistake. Impostor syndrome can have negative effects on transition and social adjustment (Davis, 2012). It can prevent students from fully engaging the environment and building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Transfer students, especially those who are first-generation and from low-income families, may also suffer from *performance anxiety*. Performance anxiety can prevent students from making vital social connections and fully participating in social as well as academic environments (Davis, 2012). The more students are involved in or integrated into college life, the greater the likelihood they will stay in college and attain their degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). With this information, advising programs, career service counseling, financial aid, and wellness services should be integrated as pivotal resources to assist with social adjustment (Laanan, 2001).

The Transfer United Program

The Transfer United program at UNC-CH was designed to mitigate *transfer shock* and, as such, its goal is to support student's social and academic adjustment. The program is based on the premise that student success is a combination of academics, wellness, and engagement. Across the domains of academics, wellness, and engagement, Transfer United provides programmatic components designed to result in academic and social adjustment outcomes to help students succeed (see Table 1).

	<i>Student Success</i>				
Domain	<i>Academics</i>	+	<i>Wellness</i>	+	<i>Engagement</i>
Program Component	3 Credit Academic Course		Transfer Success Group		Living-Learning Community
	↓		↓		↓
Academic Adjustment Outcome	Introduced to academic rigor of research university		Appreciation of the ways in which wellness issues (sleep, healthy habits, help seeking behaviors, goal setting) influence academic performance		Learning introduced in the classroom is continued beyond the classroom setting
Social Adjustment Outcome	Participants become a member of a community of scholars		Introduction to and interaction with university resources results in students being more likely to engage with faculty and staff and utilize resources		Enhanced sense of belonging including commitment to a peer group and commitment to the university

Table 1: *Transfer United Program Logic Model*

In addition to program component outcomes for academic and social adjustment, Transfer United has several broad learning outcomes for academics, wellness, and engagement:

- **Academics:** Participants will academically integrate into the university. They will develop a greater understanding of the academic rigor of Carolina courses. Students will be knowledgeable of and use university resources to support their success.
- **Social:** Participants will socially integrate into the university. Students will enhance their sense of connection to the UNC-CH community.
- **Wellness:** Participants will work towards developing a positive and healthy sense of self and will promote wellness in their community. Participants will enhance their individual success, satisfaction, and self-awareness.

Program Development and Coordination

With a charge to improve the junior transfer retention rate, a steering group of professionals from UNC-CH's Office of Undergraduate Retention, Housing and Residential Education, New Student and Carolina Parent Programs, Academic Advising Program, Career Services, The Learning Center, Undergraduate Admissions, and the Center for Student Success and Academic Counseling launched the first Transfer United cohort in fall 2011. The mission of Transfer United is to promote the transition of transfer students to Carolina by encouraging student success through academics, wellness, and engagement. The vision for Transfer United is to help transfer students connect to the university and their undergraduate experience at Carolina and ultimately, persist to graduation. Transfer United is based on a curriculum approach guided by learning outcomes, intentional academic and social experiences, and high impact educational practices.

The program targets junior transfers from community colleges; however, some four-year university transfers participate in the program. The steering committee targeted junior transfers from community colleges because they are the least likely to graduate from UNC-CH (see Table 2). UNC-CH enrolls approximately 29,000 students of which approximately 18,000 are undergraduates. Transfer

students account for 11% of the undergraduate student population at UNC-Chapel Hill. Of the 850 incoming transfer students enrolled each fall, roughly 400-450 are junior transfer students. Transfer students at UNC-CH are more likely than non-transfer to be a first-generation college student and on need-based student aid (Institutional Research, 2012).

2008 Transfer Cohorts	Transfer From	Within 4 Years	Within 5 Years
Sophomore	North Carolina Community College	65.0%	72.5%
	Other Community College	78.9%	78.9%
	4-Year Institution	73.1%	83.8%
	<i>Subtotal</i>	72.9%	82.4%
Junior	North Carolina Community College	66.7%	81.9%
	Other Community College	61.1%	86.1%
	4-Year Institution	71.2%	89.4%
	<i>Subtotal</i>	64.4%	85.6%
All Transfers	Total	69.2%	83.8%
Native 1st Year		81.1%	88.6%

Table 2: *Transfer and Native First-Year Graduation Rates at UNC-CH*

Transfer United participants are recruited through a personalized interest letter and program brochure sent to all incoming junior transfer students. The mailing also includes information about the transfer academic advising reception and other transitional opportunities for incoming transfer students. If interested, students complete an online demographic application and essays for program consideration. After the inaugural year, interviews were added to the application process to increase participant understanding of the program and to gauge student motivation. A residential community director, undergraduate student coordinator, resident advisor, and a peer mentor manage the day-to-day operations of the program. An advisory council of faculty and staff from across the university provide additional support including suggestions for improvement, assistance with programs, and helping students make connections to the campus community. The advisory council meets once per semester and the Transfer United leadership team meets weekly.

Program Components and Outcomes

Transfer United is comprised of three components: a three credit academic course called the Junior Transfer Seminar (IDST 301), the Junior Transfer Success Group, and a residential living-learning community. Twenty-five students participate in Transfer United each year. Each student signs a participant agreement form which outlines expectations for involvement in all three program components.

Three Credit Academic Course

All Transfer United participants enroll in a three-credit academic course called the Junior Transfer Seminar: *American College and Universities*. The Junior Transfer Seminar, developed prior to Transfer United, was designed to help junior transfer students make a successful transition to the University. All students who register for this course are junior transfer students. The goal of the seminar is to give new transfer students the opportunity to work closely with an instructor in a small-class environment and to meet other transfer students. The seminar emphasizes class discussion as well as learning in creative ways. The seminar is also designed to help students refine their communication skills, including the ability to speak clearly and write persuasively, as well as build critical thinking and research skills. Participating in the seminar helps transfer students build a network of peers with the common experience of transferring. This support system can help smooth their transition to the University. The course fulfills social science and experiential education general education requirements. The course is

also considered a research-intensive course as students must complete 30 hours of qualitative research over the course of the semester.

The course examines American colleges and universities from a variety of perspectives ranging from the individual (student) experience to the role of higher education in larger social systems. Students read interdisciplinary texts and engage in experiential learning activities exploring multiple facets of higher education such as faculty; teaching, learning, and curriculum; college students; organizations, leadership, and governance; and, higher education policy. The course explores various types of institutions in American higher education such as community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, private liberal arts colleges, and research universities. Students compare the unique needs of these varying institutions as well as the diverse populations they serve. They also explore the lived experiences of students in higher education as well as the demographic make-up of the college student population in the United States. Differences among various campus subgroups, including differences related to age, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation, are examined. Readings, activities and class discussions consider student growth and development during college, the effects of educational environments on student learning in college, and best practices for student success.

In addition to reading relevant literature and research on American colleges and universities in multiple frameworks (historical, political, educational, psychological, and social) students collect qualitative data and reflect on their own experiences as participants in higher education. Specifically, students explore questions such as “What is the value of a liberal arts education?”, “What is the role of diversity in higher education?”, and “What does it mean to be a member of a community of scholars?” Through field work experiences, students collect and organize qualitative data from members of the University community. For the final project, students analyze the research data they have collected from interviews and observations as well as reflect on their participation in higher education. Students report research findings in a written autoethnography as well as a class presentation.

Through participating in the course, transfer students are introduced to the academic rigor of a research university. They are challenged to develop research skills, collect data, and produce a scholarly report. The nature of the research project requires that they complete observations, interviews, and field work experiences in their new university environment. This pushes students to become acquainted with their new environment from a personal as well as a scholarly perspective. By the completion of the course, students have become a member of the community of scholars at UNC-CH.

Junior Transfer Success Group

The Transfer Success Group is designed to support a successful transition to Carolina and to discuss questions and concerns unique to transfer students. The group meets on a weekly basis for the first seven weeks of the fall semester. The group meetings are led by two staff members; one from Diversity and Multicultural Affairs and one from the Office of Undergraduate Retention. In the success group, students have the opportunity to network with University professionals and engage directly with campus resources that can help them actualize their personal, academic, and professional goals. Each weekly session has a specific topic such as “Staying Balanced at Carolina: Health, Wellness, Safety, and Money,” “Opportunities Beyond the Classroom,” “Life After Undergrad,” and “Leadership, Networking and Making the Best Connections.” As part of the success group, transfers explore the habits, perspectives and behaviors of successful students. They engage with faculty and staff members from academic support offices and representatives from academic enrichment programs on campus. They also engage directly with academic resources and tools (e.g., self-assessments, learning strategies, time-management programs). During the course of the seven weeks, participants develop academic, wellness, and engagement goals for their undergraduate experience and for life after college. Students receive individualized support and guidance with goal development and attainment. In addition to the weekly meetings, each student meets individually with the two staff members leading the group to discuss their progress.

Through the Transfer Success Group, participants increase their knowledge of university resources and services. The group breaks down barriers to accessing these resources by bringing

representatives from these resources (e.g., The Learning Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, Academic Advising) to the meetings and explicitly discussing the benefits of the resources and how they can be easily accessed. This activity results in students being more likely to engage with faculty and staff and utilize resources. By the end of the group meetings, students develop an appreciation of the ways in which wellness, including help seeking behaviors and goal setting, influence academic performance.

Living-Learning Community

Transfer United participants live in the same residential community for an entire academic year. The goal of this community is to provide a continuous learning environment from the classroom to the residential facilities and is thus called a Living-Learning Community (LLC). The LLC is designed to enhance sense of belonging including commitment to a peer group and commitment to the university. In the LLC, students participate in community programming that extends and reinforces concepts from the three-credit academic course and the Transfer Success Group. Furthermore, the LLC provides programming on major exploration, academic success, study skills, career development, leadership development, service learning, and personal wellness. The Transfer United leadership team leads programming efforts in the fall; in the spring, students serve on programming committees and are responsible for planning programs.

To assist with their transition, Transfer United students move in early and spend time bonding and connecting through icebreakers, a ropes course, and a welcome reception with the steering committee. Students also attend Convocation together, learn the campus bus routes, participate in a find-your-class activity, and a transfer credit reevaluation workshop. In the spring, Transfer United students participate in a spring retreat based on the Leadership Challenge by Kouzes and Posner (2007). Through collaborative university partnerships connected to the residential community, Transfer United aims to bolster students' sense of self-awareness, satisfaction, and personal success.

Preliminary Assessment

Transfer United has just completed its second year and, as such, assessment findings are nascent. Nonetheless, they do point to Transfer United as a promising practice and are worth discussion here. Of the initial Transfer United cohort, 24 of 25 students were retained to their second semester (96%). The one student who was not retained reported leaving because the university was "not a good fit." Fourteen participants finished their first semester with a grade-point average of a 3.000 or above; six students had a 2.500 or above and five had less than a 2.500. This cohort will be followed over the next few years to monitor graduation outcomes.

In addition to reviewing academic indicators including retention rate, grade-point average, and graduation, Transfer United utilizes four assessment tools in effort to determine if the program is meeting desired outcomes for academic and social adjustment. These tools include:

- course evaluations
- focus groups
- pre-program and post-program surveys
- post-program interviews

Preliminary data suggests that the program is on course to promote optimal academic and social adjustment; however, more time, more participants, and further assessment is necessary to make conclusive statements regarding the efficacy of the program.

Progress Toward Academic Adjustment Outcomes

Pre-program and post-program surveys suggest that students in the program make gains in academic adjustment. By the end of the Transfer United program, 88% of participants reported that they felt academically prepared. Pre-program, 63% of students agreed or strongly agreed they knew how to

access academic resources. Post-program, 88% agreed or strongly agreed they knew how to access academic resources, representing a 25% increase. Students in the program also increased their meetings with academic advising by 7%, increased setting post-graduation goals by 14%, and increased knowing how to resolve transfer credit issues by 16%.

In terms of academic adjustment, focus groups found that students perceived that the resources they received from being in Transfer United aided in their academic success. One student noted, the success group helped her learn the professor perspective for success in the classroom and that perspective taught her how to be successful in class. Still, several students commented that they believed nothing could have fully prepared them for the academic rigor at UNC-CH. Many students remarked that it is something every student has to experience and learn how to navigate. Students suggested adding more academic advising resources and transfer credit evaluation support for program participants.

Progress Toward Social Adjustment Outcomes

In the area of social adjustment, it appears that students in the program are adjusting well to their new social environment. Focus groups revealed that students felt that the program's living arrangements positively influenced students' sense of community by creating a student support group. The focus group also revealed that students enjoyed sharing their goals and life lessons with one another and learning from campus speakers. One student felt Transfer United helped her to "break out of her shell." Others noted they became more self-aware through being away from home and living with a new roommate. Several students felt that speakers from across campus exposed them to the breadth of campus resources, helped them navigate UNC, and transition more quickly than transfer students who were not in Transfer United.

Students showed a 16% increase from the pre to post surveys in feeling connected to the campus. Students' ease with joining organizations and making new friends increased 16% and 6% respectively. Post-program interviews revealed that students felt Transfer United helped set a social foundation for their experience at UNC-CH. One person noted, "After talking with other transfers outside of Transfer United, you realize how much you have been helped and it really puts things into perspective." All of the interviewees reported that they felt like they had an instant support system and group of friends because of Transfer United. Overwhelmingly, students felt Transfer United helped them get connected and remain connected to UNC. Some students commented that benefiting from Transfer United motivated them to give back to other transfer students at UNC. One student stated, "I don't know where I would have been without the program."

Conclusion

In times of important political, economic, and social change on a national scale, the success of transfer students has become increasingly important. Meeting the goals of the American Graduation Initiative requires higher education institutions to implement proactive retention and degree completion strategies (Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011). Colleges and universities need to develop innovative programs to meet the needs of transfer students and encourage their persistence. Such programs require strategic partnerships to meet both the academic and social adjustment needs of transfer students.

The Transfer United program at UNC-CH is built on partnerships from units across campus. Faculty and staff from academic and student affairs have strategically collaborated to provide the Transfer United program to new junior transfer students. The program is premised on the notion that student success is a combination of academics, wellness, and engagement. By offering connected programs in each of these three domains, Transfer United is striving to promote optimal academic and social development among transfer students. Preliminary assessment of the program is positive. The Transfer United program is a promising practice that could be implemented at other universities to help increase the success of transfer students. The program at UNC-CH will continued to be monitored and results will be shared.

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